

One Post, Two Regimes: Social Media Vetting, Immigration Screening, and the American Double Standard of Speech

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The same social media post can live under two radically different legal skies. A U.S. citizen in Kansas can share gun photos, circulate dark humor memes, denounce the federal government, argue fiercely about Israel and Gaza, or proclaim exclusive religious truth claims—actions that are both culturally ordinary and broadly protected under the First Amendment. Yet a foreign national who has posted materially similar content may find those same words scrutinized by consular officers and border algorithms as possible indicators of extremism, instability, or security risk. The result is an asymmetric speech regime: what counts as “normal” expression for insiders can become grounds for heightened suspicion, visa denial, or travel restriction for outsiders. This paper examines that double standard as a product of legal doctrine, national security policy, and sociotechnical infrastructure. Using “Kansas-normal” online behavior as an anchor, it analyzes how content clusters around firearms, religion, anti-establishment rhetoric, and foreign policy are reinterpreted when viewed through immigration vetting frameworks. It then explores the ethical and political stakes of building border control on opaque readings of everyday digital life. Finally, it asks what it means to live honestly—without self-betrayal or denial of others—in a world where borders are increasingly drawn through timelines and comment threads.

Keywords: social media screening, immigration vetting, visa waiver program, first amendment, Kansas, online speech, national security, algorithmic risk scoring, border control, double standard, digital surveillance, platform governance, extremist indicators, political expression, religious expression.

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1. Introduction

The contemporary border is no longer just a line on a map or a checkpoint at an airport; it is also an interpretive apparatus trained on public speech. In the United States, this apparatus splits the world into two categories: citizens, whose speech is broadly shielded by constitutional protections, and noncitizens, whose speech is treated as one variable in a risk model governing a revocable privilege to enter. The divide is not just abstract. The very same image of a rifle posted on a social media profile, the same sarcastic meme about the federal government, or the same anguished commentary on war and foreign policy can be understood one way when expressed by a U.S. citizen living in Kansas, and quite another when expressed by a foreign national seeking to cross the border.

This paper explores that asymmetry as a structured phenomenon rather than a collection of anecdotes. The focus is not on the question of whether any screening is legitimate in principle, but on how particular patterns of everyday speech—especially those centered on firearms, religion, anti-establishment narratives, and foreign conflicts—are reinterpreted once they pass from a domestic constitutional context into an immigration and national-security context. At stake is a double standard of speech: the emergence of two regimes of interpretation, both looking at the same platforms, but applying different assumptions, legal rules, and thresholds for alarm.

The introduction sets out the basic contrast and explains why a grounded, regionally specific reference case can help make the dynamics visible. It then sketches how the subsequent sections move from legal architecture, to concrete speech patterns, to the sociotechnical machinery that reads them, and finally to ethical and political reflection on how to live with integrity in a landscape where visibility and vulnerability are unevenly distributed.

1.1 One post, two regimes of interpretation

The starting point is deceptively simple: a single social media post occupies different normative universes depending on who wrote it and who is reading it. In one universe, the reader is another citizen scrolling through a feed; in the other, a consular officer, border agent, or automated triage system tasked with identifying risk. The first universe is governed primarily by norms of social acceptability and platform policies, backed by the distant presence of constitutional speech protections. The second is governed by immigration statutes, national-security directives, and internal risk taxonomies where access to the country is always provisional.

Consider a stylized example. A Kansas resident posts a photo at a shooting range with a caption celebrating marksmanship and the right to bear arms. Friends may like or ignore it; platform moderation systems are unlikely to intervene; the law sees nothing unusual so long as no

explicit threats are made. Now transpose the same content to the profile of a prospective visitor from abroad whose application is subject to social media review. The identical image and caption can be recoded as a potential indicator of familiarity with weapons, interest in militias, or alignment with loosely defined extremist subcultures. The post has not changed, but the interpretive frame has.

The same is true of other clusters of expression. A long thread criticizing government overreach, sharing conspiracy-tinged memes about corruption or surveillance, or passionately arguing about distant wars is legible at home as ordinary political talk, passionate but unremarkable. Under vetting, the same phrases may be pulled into categories such as anti-government extremism, foreign conflict affinity, or instability. The difference is not just in the eye of the beholder; it is institutionalized in checklists, training materials, and software systems. Section 2 will trace how this duality is encoded in law, while later sections examine how it plays out in practice.

1.2 From luggage checks to timeline checks: the new border

Historically, border control has been imagined through the metaphor of luggage: travelers present documents and belongings, which can be inspected for contraband, false identities, or signs of threat. The rise of social media has quietly added another container to this list: the public profile, which is no longer just a private scrapbook but a kind of portable dossier attached to the traveler. Screening practices that once focused on passports, tickets, and physical baggage now routinely extend to timelines, photo albums, and comment histories.

This transformation has several important features. First, it shifts attention from what a person carries to what a person has said and shown over time. The inspection is no longer limited to what crosses the border physically on the day of travel, but can reach back years into accumulated expression. Second, it introduces categories of risk that are partly aesthetic and narrative: particular symbols, styles of humor, or ways of framing events become proxies for deeper dispositions. Third, it takes place within an environment built by private platforms whose moderation rules, data structures, and interface choices were not designed with consular adjudication in mind. The border is, in effect, layered on top of an existing, commercially driven architecture.

The move from luggage checks to timeline checks thus brings together two systems with different logics: national security, which is trained to think in terms of worst-case scenarios and low-probability, high-impact events; and everyday social media, which is saturated with exaggeration, performance, and context-dependent in-jokes. When the former reads the latter, misalignments are inevitable. The concept of “Kansas-normal” speech is introduced here not as

a claim that Kansas is unique, but as a concrete shorthand for a thick cluster of practices that illustrate this misalignment vividly.

1.3 Methodological note: using “Kansas-normal” speech as a reference case

To make the double standard visible, this paper adopts a deliberately grounded reference point: “Kansas-normal” online speech. The term is not meant to be a precise sociological category. It serves as a convenient label for a set of patterns that, while not universal, are common in many parts of the United States and particularly salient in regions where firearms culture, conservative Christianity, and skeptical attitudes toward federal authority are woven into everyday life.

Anchoring the analysis in such a reference case has several advantages. It avoids treating controversial speech as exotic or marginal; instead, it starts from expressions that millions of citizens consider ordinary, even banal. It allows for concrete examples: photos from hunting trips, memes about constitutional rights, intense arguments about foreign conflicts that play out in comment threads, and religious posts that frame the world in terms of spiritual warfare. By treating these as normal within one legal and cultural context, the paper can then ask how they look when transported into the vetting context.

There are, however, important limitations to this approach. Kansas-normal speech is not monolithic, and it does not stand in for all American speech. Urban and rural divides, racial and ethnic differences, generational changes, and subcultural variations all complicate the picture. The goal is not to essentialize a state or its people, but to use a specific, recognizable constellation of practices as a lens. Similarly, noncitizens’ speech is not viewed here through a single prism: travelers from different regions and backgrounds are subject to different stereotypes and risk assumptions. The case study is chosen for clarity, not universality.

Throughout the paper, “Kansas-normal” will thus function as a heuristic marker for one side of the asymmetry: speech that, in its home context, rests comfortably within the range of what is taken for granted, but that can be reclassified once it crosses into the border’s field of view.

1.4 Structure of the argument

The remainder of the paper unfolds in four broad movements. Section 2 examines the legal and institutional architectures that make the double standard possible. It contrasts the protections that citizens enjoy under constitutional speech doctrine with the broad discretionary powers that immigration law grants to the executive branch. It also explains how social media has been incorporated into vetting as an extension of the port of entry.

Section 3 turns to the empirical and cultural side, fleshing out the notion of Kansas-normal speech in more detail. It describes typical patterns of firearms-related content, religious

expression, anti-establishment rhetoric, and foreign policy commentary, as well as the ways these interact with platform moderation practices. The aim is to provide a thick enough description that the reader can see the material that vetting systems are later asked to interpret.

Section 4 analyzes how those systems actually re-read the same content when it appears in the profiles of noncitizens. It sets out the risk categories, pattern-detection approaches, and interpretive shortcuts that can turn jokes into possible threats or lifestyle images into signals of concern. Section 5 then pulls the threads together, arguing that what emerges is not just a set of isolated cases but a coherent double standard: one regime in which expression is a right presumptively protected, another in which it is a revocable condition of entry.

Section 6 delves into the sociotechnical infrastructure that underlies these practices, focusing on data flows, error modes, and embedded bias. Section 7 offers ethical and political reflections on hospitality, suspicion, and the integrity of conscience under conditions of asymmetric scrutiny. Section 8 sketches possible design reforms and alternatives, before the conclusion in Section 9 returns to the central question: how to live and speak honestly when the same words can mean safety for one person and exclusion for another.

2. Legal Architectures of Asymmetry

The double standard of speech between citizens and noncitizens is not just a cultural fact; it is underwritten by specific legal doctrines that allocate rights and powers unevenly. On one side stands constitutional speech protection, which constrains how the state may respond to citizens' expression and, to a lesser extent, to the expression of those already present in the country. On the other side lies immigration law, which treats admission to the territory as a discretionary privilege and gives the executive branch broad authority to exclude on the basis of predicted risk. Social media vetting lives at the intersection of these two architectures. Its asymmetries cannot be understood without seeing how the First Amendment, plenary power, consular nonreviewability, and national security rationales fit together.

2.1 First Amendment protections for citizens and their practical scope

The First Amendment is often summarized in a few lines about freedom of speech, but in practice it establishes a layered structure of protections. For citizens, especially those speaking from within the United States, the government is sharply limited in its ability to punish expression, even when that expression is harsh, offensive, or radical. Courts have developed tests that distinguish between protected advocacy and unprotected categories such as incitement to imminent lawless action, true threats, obscenity, or certain narrow forms of

defamation and fraud. The threshold for crossing from protected speech into punishable conduct is intentionally high.

This architecture has several implications for the online behavior of citizens. A Kansas resident who posts pictures of firearms, criticizes federal agencies, or argues fiercely about foreign conflicts is operating under a legal presumption of protection. Law enforcement may notice such speech; in extreme cases it may prompt investigation. But as a matter of constitutional doctrine, the state cannot simply deny that person the right to live in the country, to travel domestically, or to participate in public life solely on the basis of viewpoints or symbolic images, absent a tight fit with narrowly defined exceptions.

The practical scope of protection is not absolute. Surveillance can still occur; lists and databases can still be compiled. In moments of crisis, broad interpretations of security powers can blur the lines between speech and conduct. And for noncitizens physically present in the country, the level of protection is more contested and can be attenuated in certain settings. Yet the baseline remains: for citizens, expression enjoys strong formal protection, and any attempt to regulate it must confront courts, precedents, and a political culture that, at least in principle, valorizes free speech.

By contrast, social media vetting sits in a legal zone where many of these constraints do not apply. The same post that a citizen can publish with relative impunity can, when attributed to a foreign national seeking entry, become just one more data point in a risk assessment that is neither transparent nor subject to meaningful judicial review. The First Amendment thus contributes to the asymmetry not only by what it protects, but by where its reach ends.

2.2 Noncitizens, plenary power, and the doctrine of consular nonreviewability

Immigration law has long been shaped by the doctrine that the political branches possess plenary power over the admission of noncitizens. Under this view, decisions about who may enter the country are inherent attributes of sovereignty, entrusted primarily to Congress and the executive, and only lightly constrained by constitutional norms. Courts have repeatedly affirmed that individuals outside the territory have no fundamental right to be admitted and that the government may exclude them for a wide range of reasons, including reasons that would be impermissible grounds for punishing a citizen.

This stance is operationalized through consular nonreviewability. When a consular officer abroad denies a visa, that decision is, in most cases, insulated from judicial review. Courts have been reluctant to second-guess the factual basis or the reasoning behind such denials, requiring at most a facially legitimate and bona fide justification. In practice, this means that if an officer or centralized vetting unit characterizes a person's social media activity as raising concerns

under broad statutory categories such as security, terrorism, or foreign policy, the affected individual has little recourse.

The doctrine does not openly state that certain viewpoints are grounds for exclusion. Instead, it allows broad security and admissibility categories to be interpreted in ways that implicitly treat certain patterns of speech as proxies for dangerous dispositions. Because the person remains outside the protective circle of full constitutional rights, there is no robust forum in which to argue that the interpretation is wrong, that sarcasm has been taken literally, or that images reflect cultural context rather than hostility or extremism.

In this way, plenary power and consular nonreviewability together create a legal space in which social media vetting can flourish without the constraints that would apply if similar judgments were made about citizens inside the country. The asymmetry is not a glitch; it is a feature of how the law draws boundaries between insiders and outsiders.

2.3 Immigration law as a domain of heightened executive discretion

Beyond the doctrines that shield visa decisions from review, immigration law is structured to grant the executive branch significant discretion in identifying and acting upon perceived risks. Statutes define grounds of inadmissibility and deportability in broad terms that include security threats, terrorism-related activities, association with certain organizations, and, in some cases, conduct or beliefs deemed contrary to national interests. Within these categories, agencies enjoy wide latitude in how they gather information, how they weigh it, and how they connect it to statutory triggers.

Social media vetting fits comfortably within this discretionary domain. An algorithmic tool or human analyst may treat certain phrases, symbols, or associations as indicators that a person could fall within one of the enumerated grounds, even if no crime has been committed and no explicit threat has been made. The standard of proof is often closer to suspicion than to adjudicated fact; a “reason to believe” or a “reasonable ground to conclude” can be enough to justify denial. Risk is framed probabilistically, and the cost of a mistaken grant of entry is imagined as potentially catastrophic, while the cost of an erroneous denial is treated as relatively minor.

This asymmetrical risk calculus encourages precautionary exclusion. If a social media profile contains elements that partially resemble patterns found in past cases of concern, decision makers are institutionally incentivized to err on the side of denial, particularly when their choices are insulated from external scrutiny. The person denied entry loses an opportunity to travel, work, or study, but the system records the outcome as a successful exercise of caution rather than as a possible injustice.

Executive discretion also extends to the design and updating of vetting programs themselves. Agencies can expand the list of platforms they examine, revise keyword watchlists, and adjust internal guidance on how to interpret online behavior, all without significant public debate. Legislative oversight tends to focus on headline questions of resource allocation and broad security priorities, not on the fine-grained mechanics of how a meme or a photograph is weighed in the balance. The domain of immigration thus becomes a testing ground for new forms of data-driven risk assessment that would be more contested if applied directly to citizens.

2.4 Social media as an evidentiary extension of the port of entry

The final piece in the legal architecture is the conceptual move that treats social media as part of the evidentiary environment of the border. Once the state regards public profiles as a legitimate source of information about character, beliefs, and associations, it becomes natural to incorporate them into the set of materials examined during adjudication. Just as an officer may inspect a traveler's documents or ask questions at primary inspection, agencies now examine timelines and posts as additional objects of scrutiny.

This extension is formally justified in several ways. Agencies argue that publicly available information is fair game; that social media can reveal ties to organizations or causes that might not appear on formal paperwork; and that in an era where individuals can adopt multiple identities and move fluidly across jurisdictions, online footprints are critical to forming a complete picture. From this perspective, social media vetting is simply an update to older practices of background checking, aligned with technological change.

Once accepted as evidence, however, social media brings with it all the interpretive ambiguities of digital life. A photograph with a firearm, a slogan on a shirt, a shared post about a controversial conflict, or a comment posted in anger or grief can be frozen in time and read without context. Likes, follows, and group memberships can be reinterpreted as endorsements rather than as casual clicks or moments of curiosity. The distinction between performance and conviction, between persona and person, is easily blurred.

Legally, the border is a liminal space where ordinary protections are thinned. Searches that would be unreasonable inland are permitted at ports of entry under the border-search exception. Social media vetting extends this liminality into the virtual realm, treating years of expression as if they were items in a suitcase to be opened and examined. Yet unlike luggage, these expressions were not created with the expectation of inspection at a checkpoint; they were produced for friends, followers, or publics under a different set of assumptions about audience and consequence.

By folding timelines into the evidentiary environment of the border, the law completes the architecture of asymmetry. Citizens, especially those not traveling, remain buffered by constitutional protections and practical limits on state response. Noncitizens seeking entry, by contrast, encounter a regime in which their speech history is reclassified as evidence to be weighed against an opaque standard of admissibility. The same platforms, the same posts, and the same words thus operate under two regimes of interpretation, grounded in this dual legal structure.

3. Defining “Kansas-Normal” Speech

To understand how social media vetting produces a double standard, it is helpful to begin from the inside: from patterns of online speech that are locally unremarkable. “Kansas-normal” is used here as shorthand for a family of practices common in many communities where firearms ownership is widespread, Christianity is central to identity, skepticism toward federal authority is culturally familiar, and foreign policy is experienced intensely through news, churches, and social networks. None of these elements is unique to Kansas, nor do they describe all Kansans. The label simply provides a concrete anchor point for examining how everyday expression can be recoded into risk when it crosses the border.

Within this reference frame, several recurring clusters of online behavior stand out. People post about guns the way others post about sports or cooking. They share verses and testimonies, and sometimes frame life in terms of spiritual warfare. They circulate anti-establishment jokes and share memes that dramatize distrust of elites. They argue about Israel, Gaza, and other conflicts with a mix of theology, patriotism, and grief. These practices are embedded in offline lives that are legible to neighbors, churches, and local institutions. On the screen, however, they are stripped of that context and presented as streams of text and images available for re-interpretation.

The following subsections sketch these clusters in more detail, not to stereotype a region, but to illustrate how a thick, internally coherent culture can be flattened into a pattern of “signals” once viewed through the lens of immigration screening.

3.1 Firearms culture, gun discourse, and everyday posting practices

In many parts of Kansas, the presence of firearms is as ordinary as the presence of pickup trucks or grain silos. Guns appear in family histories, weekend routines, and seasonal rhythms of hunting and target practice. Online, this translates into a steady flow of images and comments that treat firearms as tools, hobbies, heirlooms, and symbols of competence rather than as inherently alarming objects.

Posts may document a successful deer hunt, a day at the range, or the acquisition of a new handgun. Captions often highlight technical details—caliber, optics, modifications—or express satisfaction with accuracy and reliability. There may be instructional content: advice on safe handling, cleaning, storage, or recommendations for first-time buyers. Others share memes that connect gun ownership to self-reliance, protection of family, or defense of constitutional rights. For many, these posts function as part of a social identity—akin to participation in car culture, fishing communities, or amateur sports.

The tone ranges from earnest enthusiasm to wry humor. Jokes about “therapy at the range” or “my kind of church” combine firearms with stress relief or communal bonding. In local context, these phrases are easily recognized as metaphors. Offline, they map onto long-standing traditions: teaching younger relatives to shoot responsibly, passing down a grandfather’s rifle, participating in local shooting clubs or competitions.

Crucially, the vast majority of such posts contain no explicit threats, no calls to violence, and no connection to organized extremist groups. They express a normalized relationship to weapons within a legal environment that permits concealed carry and enthusiastic ownership. Within the community, they signal belonging and competence. Only when exported into a risk-scoring framework, in which images of firearms are treated generically as indicators of potential danger, do they begin to acquire a different, more ominous meaning.

3.2 Religious assertion, proselytizing, and spiritual warfare language

Religious expression is another central strand of Kansas-normal speech. For many, Christianity is not an occasional affiliation but a pervasive frame through which daily life, politics, and global events are understood. Social media becomes a natural extension of church bulletin boards and testimony times: a place to share verses, prayer requests, and reflections on moral and spiritual struggle.

Typical posts include images with scripture overlaid, brief devotional thoughts, or narratives of personal difficulty framed in terms of trust in God. There may be invitations to church events, links to sermons, and appeals to friends to “get right with God” or “return to the Lord.” For some, especially those shaped by evangelical or Pentecostal currents, language of spiritual warfare is common. Expressions like “the enemy is attacking,” “this is a battle in the heavenlies,” or “we must put on the full armor of God” are familiar metaphors, drawn from longstanding religious traditions.

Within the originating community, such language is legible as symbolic and theological.

“Warfare” refers to prayer, repentance, and moral struggle rather than to physical combat.

“Defeating the enemy” may mean resisting temptation, injustice, or despair. Strong contrasts

between light and darkness, truth and deception, the saved and the lost are recognized rhetorical patterns in certain preaching styles, not blueprints for social persecution.

Religious posts may also intersect with politics, especially on issues where faith communities feel morally engaged. Abortion, sexuality, schooling, and foreign policy can all be framed in explicitly theological terms. Yet even when the tone is intense, the default assumption among local readers is that these are contributions to a moral conversation, not operational plans for coercion. That they sit comfortably within a protected speech regime at home does not prevent them, once removed from their interpretive context, from being read as markers of exclusivist ideology or intolerance in a vetting environment.

3.3 Anti-establishment rhetoric, conspiracy memes, and dark humor

Distrust of distant authority has deep roots in American political culture, and it is especially pronounced in regions where federal power is experienced as remote, unresponsive, or intermittently intrusive. Online, this often manifests as a blend of earnest criticism, cynical commentary, and humorous exaggeration aimed at politicians, bureaucracies, and faceless institutions.

On a Kansas-normal feed, it is common to encounter memes about taxes, regulations, or perceived hypocrisy among elites. Jokes about “the swamp,” “unelected bureaucrats,” or “alphabet agencies” circulate widely. Some posts question the integrity of elections, the honesty of media, or the motives behind foreign interventions. Others flirt with or explicitly endorse conspiracy narratives about surveillance, financial systems, or global governance. The range is broad: from vague suspicion to elaborate alternative explanations of events.

Dark humor is a prominent tool in this repertoire. Hyperbolic statements like “burn it all down,” “the tree of liberty needs watering,” or “it’s time to hit reset” appear in images and text that are clearly stylized and sometimes self-consciously absurd. For participants, the exaggerated tone functions as a pressure valve and a way of signaling shared disillusionment rather than literal advocacy of violence. The distance between the meme and any real-world plan is taken for granted within the in-group.

At the same time, the boundary between satire and endorsement can be fuzzy. Some users share material they only half believe, motivated more by mood than by evidence. Others genuinely subscribe to alternative narratives. From the perspective of social media vetting, this ambiguity is difficult to parse. Statements that were intended as jokes can be logged as potential indicators of anti-government extremism. Casual engagement with conspiratorial content can be reinterpreted as alignment with organized movements that concern security agencies. The very density of this speech within Kansas-normal feeds illustrates how easily an interpretive gap can open between domestic and border-facing readings of the same material.

3.4 Foreign policy argument: Israel, Gaza, and global conflicts online

Foreign conflicts, especially those with religious, humanitarian, or perceived civilizational stakes, generate intense online engagement. The long-running conflict involving Israel and the Palestinians, and more recent escalations in Gaza and elsewhere, have become focal points for emotionally charged discussion that cuts across theological, political, and generational lines. In Kansas-normal speech, such debates are not peripheral; they intersect directly with religious beliefs, understandings of prophecy, and conceptions of national identity.

Some users express strong, unqualified support for Israel, framing the state's actions in terms of covenant, biblical promise, or alignment with divine purposes. Others focus on security concerns, terrorism, and strategic alliances. Posts may blend scriptural quotations with contemporary maps and breaking news. For those formed by certain strands of teaching, geopolitical events are read against the backdrop of eschatological expectations.

At the same time, there are voices that foreground the suffering of civilians in Gaza or other conflict zones, sharing images of destruction, testimonies of loss, and calls for ceasefires or justice. These posts often draw on universal moral language—compassion, human rights, solidarity—while sometimes criticizing specific governments, including the United States, for their policies or perceived complicity. In both supportive and critical modes, the language can be intense, accusatory, and thick with historical references.

Online platforms compress these threads into juxtaposed posts and comment chains where tempers run high and nuance is thin. For participants, the stakes feel existential; the distant conflict is mapped onto moral and spiritual landscapes that are very close to home. Within the domestic speech regime, such argument is part of the rough-and-tumble texture of public debate. In a vetting context, however, the same posts can be read as indicators of alignment with particular movements, susceptibility to radicalization, or hostility to key allies, depending on how risk categories are defined. Once again, the content does not change, but the institutional gaze does.

3.5 Platform moderation versus local legal and cultural norms

Underlying all of these speech patterns is a further layer of mediation: the platforms themselves. Social media companies operate under their own rules, enforced by combinations of automated systems and human moderators. These rules are influenced by global market pressures, advertiser preferences, and regulatory environments that may bear little resemblance to the local legal and cultural norms of places like Kansas.

As a result, Kansas-normal speech sometimes collides with platform norms even before any state actor takes notice. Posts about firearms can be down-ranked, demonetized, or removed if they are interpreted as glorifying weapons or violating policies on regulated goods. Religious

content framed in stark terms may be flagged as hate speech if it is read as denigrating non-believers or other faiths rather than as internal doctrinal discourse. Conspiracy memes and anti-establishment rhetoric can be subjected to fact-check labels or algorithmic suppression. Images from foreign conflicts may be limited under graphic-content rules, even when shared for humanitarian reasons.

At the same time, much material that local communities would regard as problematic can remain untouched because it does not trip automated filters or because moderation capacity is limited. The result is a patchwork environment in which what survives on a timeline is not a pure reflection of community standards or of legal boundaries, but of platform-specific enforcement decisions.

When immigration authorities and consular officers look at social media, they are seeing speech that has already passed through this filter. Yet their own risk criteria may diverge sharply from those used by platforms. A meme tolerated by a platform's moderation system might still be coded as a security concern by a vetting algorithm. Conversely, the removal of posts does not erase their influence on outside systems that may have already captured or inferred their content. The tension between platform governance and local norms thus adds another layer of complexity to the interpretation of Kansas-normal speech, reinforcing the possibility that what is ordinary in one frame can be exceptional in another.

4. How Vetting Systems Re-Read the Same Content

From the perspective of immigration and security agencies, social media feeds are not primarily sites of self-expression or community belonging; they are raw material for risk assessment. The same timelines that friends and neighbors read as slices of ordinary life are reassembled into dossiers, scored and sorted according to institutional categories. In this translation, nuances of tone, irony, and local culture are easily lost. What remains is a pattern of words, images, associations, and inferred attitudes that can be mapped onto pre-existing notions of "extremism," "instability," or other forms of "derogatory information." The result is a second life for familiar content: posts that are banal in one interpretive regime become potential indicators in another.

This section examines the mechanics of that second life. It begins with the categories that organize risk, then turns to the tools used for triage, the ways in which context drops out of view, the transformation of lifestyle imagery into security signals, and finally the role of human adjudicators working under institutional constraints. The goal is not to imply that every decision is arbitrary, but to show how the structure of the vetting environment pushes ordinary material toward meanings it did not originally carry.

4.1 Risk categories: extremism, instability, and “derogatory information”

Vetting systems do not start from a blank slate. They are anchored in legal and policy categories that define who is inadmissible or of concern. These categories include obvious elements such as direct links to terrorist organizations, explicit threats of violence, or clear endorsements of criminal activity. However, they also include softer notions: “extremist” sympathies, “unreliable” attitudes toward law and order, or signs of “instability” that might predict future misconduct. In the language of internal guidance, all of these can be folded into the broader notion of “derogatory information” that weighs against granting a visa or entry.

The breadth of these categories is important. “Extremism” may be defined not only by formal membership in organizations on official lists, but also by support for loosely structured movements, symbols, or ideologies that are seen as hostile to constitutional order or to core allies. “Instability” can encompass behavior that suggests volatility, impulsiveness, or difficulty accepting authority. The catch-all nature of “derogatory” allows almost any pattern that appears troubling to be logged as relevant, even if no statute names it directly.

When Kansas-normal speech is scanned through this lens, familiar themes can be pulled into unexpected alignments. Strong, absolutist language about politics or religion can be framed as extremism, even when it is well within domestic norms. Jokes about “burning it down” or “civil war” can be cited as hints of instability. Expressions of intense anger over foreign policy or distant conflicts can be classed as potential sympathies for groups involved in those conflicts. The categories themselves may be intentionally flexible to allow for discretion; that flexibility is also what makes them receptive to over-interpretation.

4.2 Keyword lists, pattern detection, and automated triage of posts

The volume of data involved in social media vetting makes purely manual review impractical. As a result, agencies rely on tools for automated triage. These tools often begin with relatively simple mechanisms: lists of keywords, phrases, hashtags, and names associated with organizations, ideologies, or events of concern. More sophisticated systems may incorporate pattern detection techniques that look for combinations of terms, recurring themes, or co-occurrence with known high-risk networks.

From a design perspective, keyword lists and pattern detectors are meant to filter out the vast majority of benign activity and surface a smaller subset for closer human analysis. In practice, they are blunt instruments. A single word such as “jihad,” “martyr,” “resistance,” “revolution,” or “caliphate” may be flagged regardless of whether it appears in a critical, historical, satirical, or devotional context. Names of organizations or conflicts can trigger attention even when mentioned in passing. Hashtags used ironically or in order to critique a movement may be treated identically to those used in solidarity.

Pattern-based systems are not immune to these issues. They may, for instance, assign higher scores to profiles where firearms-related content coexists with anti-government rhetoric and strongly worded religious posts. From the standpoint of Kansas-normal life, this combination is unremarkable; from the standpoint of a risk model trained on a small set of serious incidents, it can begin to resemble the profile of someone who might pose a threat. The problem is not that pattern detection is inherently misguided, but that the distance between statistical correlation and individual meaning is large, and vetting systems are structurally oriented toward caution rather than toward charitable interpretation.

The automated layer is thus where Kansas-normal speech can first be separated from the mass and placed in a queue for further scrutiny. The triggers are not evil in themselves; they are crude approximations meant to cope with scale. Yet it is precisely at this stage that the peculiarities of local culture are least visible, and where the seeds of misclassification are planted.

4.3 Context collapse: when sarcasm, metaphor, and hyperbole go literal

Even when content is routed to human reviewers, it often arrives stripped of the context that would make its tone and intent clear. Posts are presented as isolated snippets, sometimes with minimal surrounding conversation, without long histories of interaction, and without the offline relationships and environments that shaped them. What appears on the analyst's screen is a collage of statements that may be months or years apart, curated for their match with risk criteria. This process produces a form of context collapse: expressions once grounded in specific situations are flattened into decontextualized text and images.

Sarcasm is especially vulnerable to this flattening. A post that says “sure, what we really need is another war” may be intended as a critique of militarism; read literally, it may be taken as a wish for conflict. A quip about “overthrowing” a local official, meant to lampoon political theater, can look, out of place, like a call for direct action. Hyperbolic expressions of frustration—“burn the whole system down”—are everyday currency in many online subcultures; in a risk-averse environment, they are candidates for literal interpretation.

Metaphor suffers a similar fate. Spiritual warfare language that describes “battles” and “weapons” of faith can be easily misunderstood if the reviewer is not familiar with the theological tradition from which it comes. Phrases about “fighting the enemy” or “taking territory for the kingdom” can be read as militant in the physical sense, even when the original intent is entirely nonviolent. Firearms metaphors used in jokes about stress relief or recreation can be reinterpreted as signals of preoccupation with violence.

The structure of vetting encourages literalism. Analysts are trained to err on the side of identifying potential threats rather than dismissing them. They may know, in the abstract, that

online speech is full of exaggeration and role-play, but they are also aware that if an incident occurs and it emerges that warning signs were missed, the consequences for their agencies and careers can be severe. In that environment, the figurative and the humorous are more easily sacrificed than the imperative to be safe.

4.4 From meme to marker: lifestyle images as security signals

Not all signals are textual. Images, especially those that recur or cluster around certain themes, are increasingly treated as meaningful data in themselves. A person who frequently posts photographs at shooting ranges, in tactical gear, or with collections of firearms may be coded as someone whose lifestyle centers on weaponry. A feed filled with symbolic flags, historical emblems, or insignia can be parsed for connections to known movements or ideologies. Even choices of clothing, gestures, and backgrounds may be interpreted as hints of affiliation.

In Kansas-normal life, these images are often straightforward records of recreation or identity: a weekend at the range, pride in a new piece of equipment, participation in historical reenactments or gun shows, group photos from church or political events. Symbols that appear in the background may be chosen for aesthetic or traditional reasons rather than for their contemporary political associations. For the poster and their local audience, the message is usually clear: here is what I enjoy, here is where I belong.

Vetting systems, however, work through the logic of markers. Certain logos, patches, flags, or slogans have been identified in training materials as associated with militias, extremist groups, or ideologically motivated violence. Once an image contains such a marker, the rest of the scene can be colored by that association. A photograph that, to friends, says “another Saturday at the range” may, to a security analyst, say “possible proximity to a movement of concern.” Even if the association is indirect or unintentional, the fact that the imagery appears repeatedly can raise the profile of the case.

There is also a subtler form of marking: the impression of intensity. A small number of firearms photos might be read as a hobby; a large, visually striking collection can be read as preoccupation. A single post about a conflict abroad might be dismissed as topical interest; a feed saturated with graphic images and commentary about one theater can be read as fixation. In both cases, lifestyle expression becomes a signal in a risk model, even though the original intention was self-presentation within a particular community, not communication with the state.

4.5 Human adjudication: checklists, gut feeling, and institutional incentives

Despite the prominence of automated tools, final decisions still involve human judgment. Consular officers, adjudicators, and specialized analysts are tasked with reviewing the material surfaced by triage systems and determining whether it justifies denial, additional questioning,

or clearance. Their work is constrained by checklists, internal guidelines, and time pressures; it is also suffused with their own intuitions and experiences.

Formal guidance may instruct them to look for certain patterns: explicit praise of violence, apparent endorsement of designated organizations, repeated statements rejecting the rule of law, or signs of volatility. Beyond these, there is often a category of “overall impression” or “totality of circumstances” that leaves room for subjective assessment. An officer may conclude that, taken together, a series of posts paints a picture of someone whose values or attitudes make them a poor fit for admission, even if no single post crosses a bright line.

Gut feeling plays a role here, sometimes acknowledged, sometimes not. Analysts bring their own cultural frames, biases, and blind spots to the material they review. A background in urban environments may make certain rural practices seem alien; unfamiliarity with a region’s religious or political idioms can make intense but ordinary language seem extreme. Training can mitigate these gaps, but it cannot eliminate them. When in doubt, the logic of precaution often prevails.

Institutional incentives reinforce this tilt. The perceived cost of a false negative—admitting someone who later does harm—is extremely high. The perceived cost of a false positive—denying entry to someone harmless—is largely externalized onto the individual and seldom feeds back into institutional accountability. This asymmetry creates a quiet pressure toward more denials, or at least toward erring on the side of extra scrutiny. Social media vetting, with its flood of ambiguous material, amplifies that pressure.

In this environment, Kansas-normal speech that has been flagged and queued for review is at a structural disadvantage. It must be interpreted by people who are rewarded for caution, using tools and categories that are designed to detect rare but serious threats rather than to honor the everyday diversity of expression. The result is an interpretive regime in which the same posts that function at home as markers of belonging, conviction, or humor can become, in the hands of the state, reasons to turn someone away at the border.

5. The Double Standard as a Speech Regime

By this point it is clear that the differences between how citizens and noncitizens are treated are not accidental side effects of high technology. They form a coherent speech regime: a structured pattern of rules, practices, and expectations that govern who may say what under which conditions, and at what cost. Social media vetting is only one component of this regime, but it crystallizes the underlying logic. Expressions that are, for citizens, part of a protected and often constitutionally valorized domain of free speech can, for noncitizens, function as tests of character, loyalty, and suitability for entry.

The core distinction runs between speech as a right and speech as a condition attached to a privilege. Around that distinction cluster asymmetries of consequence, of psychological burden, and of moral narrative. Citizens can speak in the knowledge that their status in the polity is secure absent extreme behavior; foreigners must navigate the possibility that words spoken years ago, in different moods and settings, may be reinterpreted against them. The border thus becomes more than a physical barrier; it becomes a line across which the semantics of expression shift.

5.1 Protected right versus revocable privilege: two underlying logics

The first and most fundamental difference is between speech understood as an inherent right and speech understood as one factor in the grant of a discretionary privilege. Within the domestic framework, expression is presumptively protected. Government must justify any restriction on the basis of narrowly tailored goals such as preventing imminent harm. Courts treat viewpoint-based discrimination with particular suspicion, and the burden of proof lies with the state. Even when enforcement is uneven or imperfect, the normative structure is clear: citizens are entitled to speak, and the state is constrained in its capacity to punish or suppress their words.

In the immigration context, the logic is inverted. There is no general right of admission for foreigners. Access to the territory is a favor granted by the state, subject to conditions that can include demonstration of good character, absence of certain beliefs, or lack of association with particular movements. Social media becomes one of the places where these conditions are tested. Instead of asking whether the state has sufficient reason to restrict speech, the regime asks whether the applicant has sufficiently avoided speech that would give the state reason to deny entry.

This logic shift matters because it reverses the presumption. At home, the baseline assumption is that speech is allowed unless it falls into an exception. At the border, the assumption is that entry may be denied if speech falls into a category of concern, however broadly defined. The same cluster of posts about firearms, religion, or foreign conflicts thus sits above a different threshold. For a citizen, the state must cross a high bar to act against the speaker. For a noncitizen, the speaker must clear a bar whose height is set by risk-averse administrators.

5.2 Asymmetry of consequence: domestic immunity versus border exclusion

The second layer of the regime concerns consequences. Domestic speech, even when controversial, rarely results in loss of basic membership. It may attract criticism, social sanction, or platform moderation; in extreme cases it may lead to criminal investigation or civil liability. But the ordinary, lawful expression of political, religious, or cultural views does not, by itself,

strip a citizen of residence or the ability to cross internal borders. The relationship between individual and state is durable; it can withstand significant expressive strain.

For noncitizens at the threshold, by contrast, the consequence of disfavored speech is often straightforward exclusion. A visa denial or an Electronic System for Travel Authorization refusal can be issued without a detailed explanation, and it can be difficult or impossible to appeal. The effect may be to sever family relationships, derail educational or professional plans, or block access to medical care and cultural exchange. The underlying speech might be a handful of posts that, in a different legal life, would have generated no more than an argument in a comment thread.

This asymmetry in consequence amplifies the power of interpretive error. When a Kansas-normal meme is misread at home, the worst outcome is usually a misunderstanding or an online argument. When a similar meme is misread in a vetting context, the outcome can be a travel ban. The disproportion is built into the structure of admission decisions: erring on the side of caution means erring against the interests of individuals who have no strong claim to inclusion. The system can tolerate high rates of false positives because the cost is externalized.

From the perspective of the speech regime, this means that the same words are wrapped in different levels of existential risk depending on who speaks them. A citizen in Kansas can joke about the government, post photos at the range, or take strong positions on foreign conflicts with the knowledge that, barring truly extreme behavior, the state cannot respond by expelling them. A foreign applicant cannot assume the same. For one, expression is a relatively safe instrument of identity; for the other, it is a potential hazard.

5.3 Chilling effects on foreigners: self-censorship as a mobility cost

The double standard does not only operate retrospectively, on speech that has already been posted. Over time, awareness of vetting practices reshapes anticipatory behavior. Foreigners who hope to travel to or through the United States learn, through official advisories, news reports, or word of mouth, that their online profiles may be scrutinized. The rational response is to self-censor, delete, or avoid posting content that might be misinterpreted. Speech becomes entangled with mobility: the ticket to cross a border includes a tacit expectation of digital restraint.

This chilling effect is unevenly distributed. Those most likely to be targeted by risk criteria—because of their nationality, religion, region, or field of study—have the strongest incentives to pare down their online presence. They must weigh the value of expressing their views on domestic or international politics, religion, or conflicts against the possibility that a distant officer will see those expressions as cause for concern. The safer choice, from the standpoint of travel prospects, is silence or a bland feed curated to avoid any trace of controversy.

The cost of this self-censorship is not only personal. It reduces the diversity of voices in transnational debates and skews the perceived global conversation. If opponents of certain policies are more likely to censor themselves than supporters, the apparent online consensus shifts. If those living under repressive regimes must now also fear that criticism will jeopardize their ability to seek refuge or study abroad, the circle of constraint tightens. The chilling effect thus operates not only as an incidental byproduct of vetting but as a structural feature of a speech regime that ties mobility to expressive conformity.

By contrast, domestic speech in Kansas, while subject to its own social and economic pressures, does not bear the same direct link to the ability to cross borders. A citizen may moderate their tone out of professional caution, fear of social backlash, or platform policies, but they do not need to calculate whether a given sentence might block their entry to their own country. Their speech is not priced in visas. For noncitizens, speech and movement are coupled, and the price of saying certain things is a higher risk of being kept out.

5.4 Perceived hypocrisy: exporting free speech while screening it at the gate

A further dimension of the double standard is symbolic. The United States presents itself, both internally and externally, as a champion of free expression. Its constitutional protections, landmark court decisions, and public rhetoric are often cited as models. It encourages other states to tolerate dissent, protect journalists, and allow robust political debate. Yet at the same time, it employs social media vetting to screen out foreigners whose speech falls outside its comfort zone, even when that speech would be protected if uttered by a citizen.

This gap between ideal and practice is not lost on observers. From outside, it can appear as hypocrisy: the state that defends offensive speech at home filters offensive speech at the entrance. A person denied a visa because of posts that criticize U.S. foreign policy, express sympathy with a controversial movement, or adopt strong religious language may reasonably conclude that the vaunted commitment to free speech is conditional. The message received is that free expression is a virtue for insiders, but a liability for outsiders.

The perception of hypocrisy has downstream effects on legitimacy. It can make appeals to free speech in international forums ring hollow, especially when directed at governments that observe the disparity and use it to justify their own restrictions. It can also erode trust among foreign publics who might otherwise see engagement with U.S. institutions as an avenue for mutual understanding. If access is contingent on curating one's digital self to align with perceived American sensibilities, then the promise of open dialogue is weakened.

Domestically, this tension can remain invisible, because citizens do not experience the restrictive side of the regime. For them, the public narrative and personal experience align: they are free to say what they wish, within broad limits, and the Constitution stands behind them.

The double standard only becomes visible when those citizens look at how similarly situated individuals abroad are treated—and when they recognize that, had they been born elsewhere, their Kansas-normal posts might have had very different consequences.

5.5 The border as a global editor of online discourse

Taken together, these elements point to a final feature of the speech regime: the border functions as a global editor. It does not directly delete content, as platforms do. Instead, it selectively penalizes certain patterns of expression by attaching travel costs to them. Over time, this creates an implicit style guide for those who wish to remain eligible to cross. Avoid certain phrases; do not share certain images; mute your anger about particular conflicts; keep your religious or political intensity off the record. The edits are enforced not by moderators in comment sections, but by consular officers and automated systems.

This editorial function extends beyond individual cases. As stories circulate about denials linked to online posts, they influence broader norms. Community leaders may advise members to clean up their profiles before applying for visas. Universities may counsel prospective students to avoid controversial topics. Travel agencies and immigration lawyers may compile informal lists of “red flag” themes. The result is a distributed, informal regime of preemptive editing that reshapes what appears in the global public sphere.

The border’s role as editor is asymmetrical. It has little leverage over the speech of citizens who rarely face exclusion. Its primary influence is over foreigners whose desire or need to travel gives the state leverage over their online expression. Yet because many of those foreigners participate in transnational conversations, the effects spread. Threads about firearms, religion, government, and foreign conflicts become populated disproportionately by voices that either do not seek to cross U.S. borders or are willing to accept the risk. Others withdraw or soften their tone.

In this way, the double standard does more than create two separate regimes of interpretation. It actively contributes to shaping the landscape of speech itself. The Kansas-normal posts that remain fully protected within one jurisdiction serve as a reference point for how uneven this landscape is. What is ordinary at home can be costly elsewhere. The next sections will turn from diagnosis to questions of infrastructure, ethics, and possible reforms, but the central fact remains: social media vetting has made the border not just a site of control over bodies and goods, but a quiet editor of global discourse.

6. Sociotechnical Infrastructures Behind Screening

The double standard of speech does not operate in a vacuum. It is implemented through layered infrastructures that span platforms, government databases, and analytic tools. These infrastructures determine which posts are visible to officials, how they are combined with other data, what counts as a “match,” and which people are ultimately flagged. Understanding the speech regime therefore requires looking beneath doctrine and policy into the practical assemblages that perform screening.

At one level, these assemblages are constrained: governments cannot simply see everything, and platform architectures impose limits on what is easily accessible. At another level, they are expansive: data from travel systems, watchlists, and security files can be combined with public social media in ways that are largely invisible to the people being assessed. The same pipelines that detect real risks are also susceptible to error, bias, and self-reinforcing loops. This section examines these sociotechnical infrastructures as systems that both reflect and amplify the legal asymmetries described earlier.

6.1 What governments can actually see: public data, not private logs

A popular fear imagines border agents with direct access to the internal databases of social media platforms, able to read every private message, moderation decision, and deleted post. In most cases, the reality is more limited: governments primarily work with what is publicly visible, combined with information that individuals are required to submit or voluntarily provide. Public profiles, open posts, visible comments, and unprotected photos are fair game. Private messages, internal platform “strike” histories, and granular engagement logs are generally out of reach absent specific legal processes or cooperation in targeted investigations.

This distinction matters. When a Kansas citizen is placed in “Facebook jail” for violating platform policies, that fact does not appear on a dashboard in a consular office. What does appear, if the profile is publicly accessible, is the content that led to the moderation event, provided it has not been removed. If a post is deleted or restricted, it may still be accessible through third-party archives, screenshots, or searches, but there is no automatic pipeline from platform enforcement to immigration vetting.

Still, within the domain of public data, the reach of governments is broad. Tools exist to scrape, archive, and search open profiles at scale. Applicants may be asked to list their handles, making it easier to locate their accounts. Some programs also invite or require individuals to make profiles temporarily public. For visitors, the distinction between public and private is thus critical: what remains public is what may be seen and interpreted, while what is kept private or under tight access controls stands outside the default field of view.

The reliance on public data also shapes the biases of screening. Those who maintain a low or locked-down online presence may generate fewer signals, while those who participate actively in open conversations produce rich datasets. The Kansas-normal user who freely posts about guns, religion, and politics under their real name becomes highly legible in a vetting context if they were a noncitizen; someone with similar views who avoids public posting would appear far less risky simply because the infrastructure cannot easily “see” them.

6.2 Data fusion: watchlists, travel histories, and social media in combination

Social media rarely stands alone. It is interpreted in conjunction with other information already in government hands. Watchlists maintained by security agencies, records of prior travel, visa applications, border crossings, and law enforcement databases all contribute to a composite picture. Data fusion systems link these sources using identifiers such as names, dates of birth, passport numbers, and email addresses. Once linked, they allow analysts and automated systems to move from one domain to another: from a watchlist entry to a timeline, from a travel history to a pattern of online engagement.

In this environment, a Kansas-normal speech profile would not be flagged simply because it matches certain keywords. It would be weighed alongside other factors: the applicant’s nationality, regions visited, affiliations listed in prior applications, and any prior encounters with authorities. A pattern that might be ignored in isolation can become significant if it aligns with other risk markers. Conversely, benign posts may be overshadowed by unrelated entries in security files.

The fusion process is not transparent to the individuals involved. They do not know which databases are being connected, which risk models are being applied, or which combinations of features are driving concern. A foreign applicant might assume that their social media is being checked separately from their travel history; in practice, these elements are often integrated. For citizens, the same fusion capabilities may exist, but the consequences of pattern detection are constrained by the domestic legal regime. For noncitizens at the border, the fused view feeds directly into the discretionary decision to admit or exclude.

Data fusion also raises questions about noise and signal. When numerous databases are linked, the likelihood of partial matches, misattributed records, or outdated information increases. A common name can generate collisions across systems. Errors introduced in one database can propagate through the fused network. Social media then functions as both a potential source of corroboration and another point where misalignment can occur.

6.3 Error and false positives: ordinary behavior that matches “risk” patterns

Any system built to detect rare but serious threats in a large population must balance sensitivity and specificity. When the priority is to avoid missing any potential danger, thresholds tend to be

set low, meaning that more people are flagged for further review. In the context of social media vetting, this translates into a high rate of false positives: individuals whose ordinary, lawful behavior happens to match abstract patterns associated with risk.

Kansas-normal speech is especially vulnerable to such misclassification because it sits near several categories that risk models are trained to notice: firearms content, strong religious rhetoric, anti-establishment language, and intense commentary on foreign conflicts. These features may appear in case histories of genuinely dangerous individuals; from a purely statistical standpoint, they can acquire weight as indicators. But they are also pervasive among people who pose no threat at all. The overlap between signal and background is substantial.

Error can enter at many points. Automated systems may misread sarcasm, metaphor, or shared content that does not reflect endorsement. Transliteration issues and slang can generate false matches with watchlist keywords. Image recognition tools may misidentify symbols on clothing or in the background of photos. Even the mere co-occurrence of certain topics within a feed may be enough to raise a score, without regard to tone or intent.

From the standpoint of the speech regime, false positives have different consequences for citizens and noncitizens. A citizen whose posts trigger internal alerts may be subjected to surveillance or, in extreme cases, investigation, but their basic right to remain in the country is not immediately at stake. A noncitizen applicant, however, can be denied entry with little explanation. The cost of error falls heavily on outsiders, while the system's designers and operators experience it as a necessary byproduct of vigilance.

The visibility of these errors is limited. Individuals denied visas because of misinterpretations of their social media seldom receive detailed reasons and have little opportunity to contest the interpretation. This opacity prevents errors from being systematically corrected and makes it difficult for communities to adjust their behavior based on clear feedback. The result is a system that is both error-prone and self-insulating.

6.4 Bias and structural tilt: religion, nationality, race, and ideology

No sociotechnical system is neutral. The categories used in risk models, the choice of keywords, the training materials for analysts, and the background assumptions about who is likely to pose a threat all reflect broader social and political biases. In practice, this means that social media vetting is not applied uniformly across all forms of Kansas-normal speech and its global analogues. Instead, there is a structural tilt that makes certain combinations of religion, nationality, race, and ideology more likely to attract scrutiny.

For example, religious language from majority-Christian contexts may be read as intense but benign, while similar language from minority or stigmatized traditions is more easily mapped onto extremism. Posts about firearms from citizens of countries with strong positive cultural

associations with guns may be treated as lifestyle content, while identical posts from individuals of certain nationalities are treated as more suspicious. Criticism of foreign policy from within allied states may be afforded more leeway than similar criticism from residents of regions associated with instability or hostility.

This tilt can be subtle. Risk models trained on historical data will reproduce the patterns of past enforcement, which themselves may reflect political priorities and prejudices. If particular groups have historically been overrepresented in security investigations, the model will treat their characteristics as more predictive. Analysts, working within these models, may unconsciously treat certain symbols or phrases as more serious or less forgivable depending on the perceived background of the speaker.

The asymmetry is compounded by the fact that those most affected by bias in vetting have the least ability to influence the design of the systems that judge them. The Kansas-normal citizen can participate in domestic debates about policing, surveillance, and civil liberties. The foreign applicant, especially from marginalized regions, has little voice in these processes. Bias thus becomes embedded structurally, reinforcing existing hierarchies of whose speech is tolerated and whose is penalized.

6.5 Feedback loops: how criteria for suspicion reshape online behavior

Finally, the infrastructures behind screening do not simply observe behavior; they also shape it. Once certain patterns of speech or imagery are identified as risky, whether through formal guidance or informal folklore, individuals and communities adjust their online practices in response. This adjustment, in turn, feeds back into the data on which models are trained and into the expectations of analysts.

Consider a community abroad that learns its members are being denied visas due to posts that combine firearms imagery, strong religious claims, and criticism of U.S. policy. Over time, those who wish to preserve their chances of travel may avoid posting such content, switch to coded language, or move discussions into private channels. The public social media landscape then becomes less representative of their true views and more aligned with what they believe vetting systems expect. When models are retrained on this filtered data, they may detect new patterns as markers of risk, and the cycle continues.

Feedback loops can also reinforce narrow conceptions of normality. If the speech of certain groups is systematically screened and self-censored, while the speech of others is left relatively unfiltered, the “baseline” of acceptable expression will be skewed toward the latter. Risk models and human analysts will grow accustomed to seeing Kansas-normal speech as the default and more readily interpret deviations from it as cause for concern. This is one way in which the

double standard reproduces itself: by subtly setting some expressive styles as the yardstick and treating others as inherently suspicious.

The loops extend into platform governance as well. If governments signal that specific content categories are security concerns, platforms may respond by modifying their moderation systems to down-rank or remove such content preemptively. Users then encounter fewer examples of the speech in question, reinforcing the impression that it is outside the bounds of what is acceptable. Even where the original motive was national security, the combined effect is a tightening of expressive possibilities across multiple layers of infrastructure.

These feedback effects underscore that social media vetting is not a one-way act of observation. It is an intervention in the ecology of online speech, one that operates through the interplay of law, technology, and human adaptation. The next section turns from these infrastructural dynamics to broader ethical and political questions about hospitality, suspicion, and the integrity of conscience in a world where words can change their meaning when they cross a border.

7. Ethical and Political Reflections on Hospitality and Suspicion

The technical and legal architecture of social media vetting raises questions that cannot be resolved within law or engineering alone. At stake is not only how borders are administered, but how a political community understands its obligations to strangers, the value it places on conscience, and the degree of scrutiny it is willing to normalize as the price of security. The shift from luggage checks to timeline checks is also a shift from policing objects to policing interior states inferred from expression. Even if the intent is to prevent harm, the tools reach into zones that many consider part of moral or spiritual privacy.

This section explores the ethical and political tensions that arise when hospitality is filtered through suspicion, when risk management touches deep convictions, and when the protections of free speech are applied unevenly across populations. It also considers how pervasive screening affects the integrity of interior life and the fabric of social trust. These reflections do not yield a single policy prescription, but they help clarify what is at stake when decisions about social media vetting are made.

7.1 Hospitality, fear, and the moral status of the stranger at the border

Borders are not only legal devices; they are moral thresholds. The person who approaches them is a stranger whose intentions are uncertain. Historically, many traditions wrestle with a dual imperative: to protect the community from harm and to extend some measure of welcome to those who come in need or good faith. Social media vetting shifts the balance of these

imperatives toward fear, framing the stranger primarily as a potential risk to be screened, rather than as a guest whose dignity merits a presumption of good will.

The ethical question is not whether caution is permissible. States have obligations to protect those within their jurisdiction. The question is how far suspicion should be allowed to pre-empt hospitality, and what kinds of evidence are appropriate bases for exclusion. When a person's online record of deeply felt beliefs, frustrations, and identifications is treated as a test of admissibility, the stranger is being evaluated not just for concrete behavior, but for interior alignment with the host society's norms.

This reclassification changes the moral status of the encounter. Instead of meeting someone in the open uncertainty of face-to-face interaction, institutions meet a pre-processed profile shaped by algorithms and legal categories. Hospitality, if extended, is increasingly conditional on having expressed oneself in the "right" way in the past. There is an ethical cost when welcome is contingent on such retrospective alignment: it narrows the space in which difference, disagreement, or even misjudged words can be accommodated.

7.2 Risk management versus respect for conscience and conviction

Social media vetting also implicates conscience. Many of the posts that attract attention in screening are expressions of deeply held convictions: about the legitimacy of certain wars, the justice of certain policies, or the truth of particular religious claims. When such expressions are treated as risk indicators, the vetting regime effectively tells potential visitors that their inward commitments may be grounds for keeping them out, even if they have never acted violently or unlawfully.

From a risk management perspective, this may seem justified. If past patterns show that certain combinations of beliefs and attitudes correlate with higher probabilities of harmful action, then factoring those into screening appears prudent. The difficulty is that conscience is not a neatly quantifiable variable, and treating it as such risks instrumentalizing something many regard as inviolable. A system that says, in effect, "you may enter if your convictions fall within this acceptable band" pressures individuals to either modify their beliefs, hide them, or accept exclusion.

Respect for conscience does not require that every conviction be welcomed without consequence, especially when it is paired with explicit advocacy of violence. But it does suggest caution in using abstract expressions of belief as proxies for future harm. Ethical concern grows as the criteria move away from concrete incitement and toward more diffuse judgments about what attitudes are comfortable for the host society. The more the system punishes people for expressing intense, unpopular, or counter-majoritarian convictions, the more it drifts from security toward ideological filtering.

7.3 Equality before the law and stratified exposure to scrutiny

The double standard in speech protection also raises questions about equality. Within many legal orders, equality before the law is a central value, even if always imperfectly realized. Social media vetting, as practiced across the citizen–noncitizen divide, enshrines inequality as a structural feature. Citizens enjoy robust protections against punishment for lawful speech; noncitizens are subject to searching review of their speech, with few avenues for challenge.

Defenders of this arrangement argue that citizenship is precisely the line at which legal protections differ, and that this is both inevitable and appropriate. Yet even if some differentiation is accepted, the degree of stratification matters. When one group can speak freely without jeopardizing basic status, while another must calibrate every public statement to preserve the possibility of movement, the law is not merely distinguishing between inside and outside. It is allocating drastically different levels of vulnerability to expressive risk.

Ethically, this stratification is troubling when those most exposed to scrutiny are also those least able to participate in the political processes that shape screening. Noncitizens have limited voice in the host society’s debates over national security, speech, and privacy, yet their online lives are among the most closely watched. The result is a layered inequality: differences in legal status compounded by differences in representation, all built on the same platforms where discourse unfolds.

7.4 Integrity of interior life under pervasive screening

Beyond overt inequality, there is a quieter ethical concern about the integrity of interior life. Social media has blurred the boundary between inner and outer, inviting people to externalize thoughts, moods, and identities that might previously have remained private or shared only in close circles. Vetting repurposes these externalizations as data for assessing admissibility. Over time, awareness of this repurposing can distort how individuals relate to their own thoughts and expressions.

If someone knows that a long-cherished belief or a deep anger about injustice might be recorded and later judged by border authorities, they may begin to second-guess not only what they post, but what they allow themselves to articulate even to friends. The self becomes a curator of its own archive under an anticipated gaze. This can erode the freedom to experiment with ideas, to confess doubts, or to express grief and outrage in raw form—all parts of a healthy interior life.

The ethical issue here is not simply privacy in a narrow sense. It is the capacity to live honestly with oneself, to let inner and outer speech align without constant strategic calculation. Citizens may already experience some attenuation of this capacity due to employer surveillance, platform moderation, or social backlash. For noncitizens subject to vetting, the pressure is

compounded by the knowledge that what they say could affect fundamental opportunities. A world in which major life paths depend on having maintained a suitably “clean” digital conscience invites a kind of self-monitoring that sits uneasily with ideals of authenticity and moral growth.

7.5 Social trust in a world of asymmetric vulnerability

Finally, the use of social media vetting has implications for social trust. Trust is not only a matter of believing that others will behave predictably; it is also a sense that institutions will handle one’s vulnerabilities with care. When people learn that their expressions of pain, anger, conviction, or doubt may be treated as risk factors by distant authorities, a subtle withdrawal can occur. The public sphere becomes less a space of shared exploration and more a stage where one performs an acceptable persona.

This erosion of trust is asymmetric. Citizens, protected from the harshest consequences of misinterpretation, can continue to use platforms with a degree of frankness, even if tempered by other concerns. Noncitizens, particularly those from communities most frequently scrutinized, may come to view public online spaces as inhospitable or dangerous, further fragmenting discourse along lines of status and exposure. The very technologies that promised to connect people across borders become, under the weight of vetting, another axis of separation.

At the institutional level, a reliance on social media vetting can signal that authorities do not trust their own capacity to assess travelers through more traditional means: interviews, references, documented histories. It can also foster a culture within agencies where suspicion becomes the default, making it harder to imagine policies rooted in a presumption of good faith. Over time, these patterns feed back into how societies see one another. If a state routinely treats foreign speech as a potential threat, those outside its borders have reason to reciprocate distrust.

In a world that will remain interconnected, some form of screening is likely to persist. The ethical challenge is to design and constrain it in ways that minimize unnecessary suspicion, respect conscience, and avoid assigning disproportionate expressive burdens to those least able to bear them. The next section turns to practical questions of transparency, proportionality, and alternative models, asking whether it is possible to secure borders without turning the global public sphere into a testing ground where every sentence may be weighed for admissibility.

8. Toward More Transparent and Proportionate Practices

If social media vetting is to remain part of border governance, the question is not only whether to use it, but how. The current regime leans heavily toward maximal collection, vague criteria, and opaque decisions, all justified by reference to worst-case scenarios. Yet there is nothing inevitable about this configuration. It is possible, at least in principle, to design practices that are more narrowly focused on genuine threats, more transparent to those affected, and more accountable to democratic oversight. Such reforms would not eliminate all tension between security and expression, but they could reduce the most gratuitous harms.

This section sketches a set of directions rather than a single blueprint. It starts from the idea of narrow tailoring: that screening should focus on signals with a demonstrable connection to risk. It then considers the role of transparency and explanation, the importance of oversight and error correction, and the need to distinguish genuine threats from cultural or regional normality. Finally, it explores alternatives to broad, routine social media vetting, arguing that targeted, evidence-based approaches may offer better tradeoffs between safety and freedom.

8.1 Narrow tailoring: defining genuinely relevant risk signals

The first step toward proportionality is to resist the temptation to treat all online expression as equally informative for security purposes. Not every strongly worded opinion, symbolic image, or culturally specific idiom has predictive value. Narrow tailoring means identifying the small subset of signals that are consistently and meaningfully associated with harmful behavior, and structuring vetting around those, rather than around broad thematic categories such as religion, firearms, or distrust of government.

In practice, this requires disciplined analysis rather than intuition. Agencies would need to distinguish between cases where social media provided actionable advance warning of violent acts and cases where it did not. They would need to ask which features of those warning cases were specific enough to justify focused attention and which were so widely distributed in the general population that they are useless as filters. Narrow tailoring thus demands an empirical look at false positives and false negatives, not just at headline incidents.

Narrow tailoring also calls for conceptual clarity. A category like extremism is too broad to serve as a precise guide; it bundles together many forms of intense belief, only some of which translate into violence or lawbreaking. A more careful approach would distinguish explicit advocacy of imminent criminal acts from abstract support for controversial ideas, and from heated but nonviolent rhetoric about political or religious questions. Only in the first case would social media content be an apt proxy for immediate risk.

Implementing narrow tailoring would inevitably reduce the number of people flagged by automated systems. That reduction may feel uncomfortable in a culture oriented toward

catching every possible warning sign. Yet it aligns with a basic intuition of justice: that the state should not penalize people on the basis of weak, diffuse, or culturally biased indicators. If vetting is to intrude into expressive life at all, it should do so on the narrowest possible grounds.

8.2 Transparency, explanation, and the possibility of contesting decisions

A second pillar of more proportionate practice is transparency. At present, many applicants whose social media is scrutinized have little idea what is being examined, how it is interpreted, or why a particular decision was reached. Visa denials are often accompanied by generic references to security grounds without specific evidence. This opacity undermines the ability of individuals to respond, to correct misunderstandings, or to adjust future behavior in informed ways.

Transparency need not entail revealing every detail of security methodologies. It does, however, imply certain minimums. Applicants could be told explicitly that their public social media may be reviewed, rather than discovering this only through rumor or media reports. Where a denial is based primarily on online expression, they could receive a summary of the concerns in plain language, including the types of posts or themes that contributed to the decision.

Alongside explanation, there should be some mechanism for contestation, even if limited. This might take the form of an internal review process where the applicant can submit clarifications, contextual information, or evidence that contested content has been misinterpreted. In some cases, it might involve the opportunity to demonstrate a change in views over time, recognizing that people do not remain frozen at the moment of their most intemperate posts.

Critics may worry that greater transparency will allow genuinely dangerous individuals to game the system. That risk is real, but it can be mitigated by calibrating the level of detail provided. The goal is not to publish the full rulebook for evading detection, but to prevent the worst injustices of silent, unchallengeable exclusion. A regime that offers no explanation and no possibility of redress asks those affected to accept its judgments on faith; in a domain as consequential as cross-border movement, that is a heavy moral demand.

8.3 Oversight, auditing, and mechanisms for correcting mistakes

Even with narrower criteria and greater transparency, mistakes will occur. False positives are inevitable when complex human lives are reduced to data points. The question is whether the system acknowledges this fallibility and builds in mechanisms to detect and correct errors, or whether it quietly treats them as acceptable collateral damage. Ethical practice requires the former: a commitment to continual self-scrutiny.

Oversight can take several forms. Internally, agencies can establish review units tasked with examining samples of decisions for consistency, bias, and accuracy. These units can track

patterns: Are certain communities disproportionately denied on the basis of similar types of speech? Are particular keywords or symbols generating large numbers of false alarms? Are there recurring themes in successful appeals that indicate systematic misinterpretation?

Externally, legislatures, independent commissions, or ombuds offices can be given authority to inspect vetting programs at a higher level. While operational details may need to remain confidential, aggregate statistics and anonymized case summaries can be shared to reveal the overall impact of social media screening. Periodic public reporting, even in broad strokes, would allow for democratic evaluation of whether the practice is yielding benefits commensurate with its costs.

Correction mechanisms are equally important. When an error is identified, there should be a way to revise both the individual decision and the underlying process that produced it. This may involve updating keyword lists, refining analytic models, or adapting training materials. It may also involve outreach to affected communities to rebuild trust after patterns of misclassification are uncovered.

Without such mechanisms, the system risks ossifying around its initial assumptions, even when they are shown to be flawed. The speech regime then becomes not only asymmetric but self-perpetuating, with little capacity to learn from its own failures.

8.4 Distinguishing genuine threats from cultural and regional normality

A central challenge for any vetting system is to distinguish between genuine threats and expressions that are normal within particular cultural, regional, or religious contexts. The earlier discussion of Kansas-normal speech illustrates how easy it is for practices that are unremarkable in one setting to resemble risk markers in another. The same is true of many communities around the world whose expressive styles do not align with the expectations of distant officials.

Addressing this challenge requires investing in contextual knowledge. Analysts and decision makers cannot rely solely on generic training about global risks; they need exposure to the lived meanings of the symbols, idioms, and rhetorical patterns they encounter. This may involve regional expertise, consultation with cultural mediators, or structured dialogues with community representatives who can explain how certain forms of expression function in situ.

Such efforts will not eliminate all misunderstandings, but they can reduce the most glaring. For example, understanding that certain religious traditions routinely use martial language metaphorically can prevent misclassification of spiritual messages as calls to physical violence. Recognizing that firearms ownership is woven into the identity of some rural communities can temper the instinct to treat every gun image as a sign of menace. Appreciating the intensity of online argument about particular conflicts can help distinguish between moral outrage and operational support for armed groups.

Another aspect of this distinction is recognizing diversity within categories. Not all expressions of anger in a conflict zone are equal; not all anti-establishment rhetoric signals identical levels of alienation or risk. Blanket assumptions about the meaning of a phrase or symbol across all contexts are likely to be wrong. A more proportionate approach would treat cultural and regional knowledge as a core component of security work rather than as a peripheral add-on.

Importantly, this contextual sensitivity should not be reserved solely for speech that resembles domestic norms. It is relatively easy for officials to see themselves in the grievances of people who share similar backgrounds; the harder ethical work is to understand expressions that arise from very different histories and power dynamics. Without this effort, vetting practices will continue to encode existing inequalities, treating some forms of intensity as normal and others as suspect.

8.5 Alternatives to broad social media vetting: targeted, evidence-based approaches

Finally, there is the question of whether broad, routine social media vetting is necessary at all. One alternative is to reserve intensive examination of online expression for cases where there is already a specific, articulable reason for concern, rather than using it as a blanket filter on vast categories of applicants. In such a model, social media becomes a follow-up tool rather than a first-pass sieve.

Targeted approaches could be triggered by factors such as credible intelligence from other channels, inconsistencies in application materials, or links to known investigations. In these cases, reviewing public online expression may yield valuable context. Because the number of cases is smaller, analysts can devote more attention to nuance, reducing reliance on crude automated indicators. The focus shifts from scanning millions of feeds for hypothetical threats to examining a narrower set of situations where risk has been identified through other means.

Evidence-based practice also requires that social media vetting be evaluated alongside other tools. If resources devoted to mass screening of timelines produce relatively few actionable leads compared to, say, improved document verification or enhanced cooperation with foreign law enforcement, then reallocating effort may make both ethical and practical sense. Security is always a matter of tradeoffs; overinvestment in one tool can come at the expense of others.

Another alternative lies in building positive channels for engagement rather than treating online expression solely as a minefield. Programs that invite prospective students, workers, or visitors to participate in structured dialogues, pre-departure orientations, or exchange networks can create spaces where concerns and misunderstandings are addressed openly. In such settings, the content of a person's convictions can be explored in conversation rather than inferred from decontextualized posts. While these initiatives cannot replace all forms of vetting, they can complement them, shifting some emphasis from surveillance to relationship.

In the end, the question is whether a security posture built on pervasive suspicion of expression is sustainable or desirable. Alternatives that are more targeted, more context-aware, and more rooted in concrete evidence offer a way to reduce the weight placed on social media as a proxy for character. They also align more closely with the ideals of free speech that many societies profess to uphold. A world in which borders are guarded does not have to be a world in which every sentence carries the shadow of admissibility.

9. Conclusion: Living Honestly Under Unequal Scrutiny

The journey from luggage checks to timeline checks has revealed more than a new tool of border control. It has exposed an underlying structure in which the same words, images, and jokes that are ordinary for some are treated as potential threats for others. Social media vetting has become a lens through which the asymmetries of modern speech regimes are sharply visible. Citizens in places like Kansas can post freely about guns, faith, government, and distant wars under the shelter of constitutional protections and local norms. Noncitizens hoping to cross the border must weigh the same kinds of expression against the risk of silent exclusion.

This concluding section brings the threads together. It recaps the core claims and contributions of the paper, sketches open questions for law, policy, and platform governance, and reflects on personal and collective strategies for maintaining integrity in a world of unequal scrutiny. It closes by considering several possible futures for borders and speech—futures in which the politics of visibility will play a central role.

9.1 Recap of the core claims and contributions

The analysis began with a simple observation: one post can live under two regimes of interpretation. For a U.S. citizen in Kansas, a social media feed saturated with firearms culture, strong religious assertion, anti-establishment rhetoric, and intense argument about foreign conflicts is often unremarkable, even expected. For a foreign national seeking a visa or visa-free entry, materially similar content can trigger concern under risk categories such as extremism, instability, or derogatory information.

The paper argued that this divergence is rooted in legal architecture. On the domestic side, the First Amendment creates a high bar for state punishment of speech, particularly when it concerns political and religious expression. On the border side, doctrines of plenary power and consular nonreviewability allow the state to deny entry based on broad, discretionary judgments with limited external oversight. Immigration law is structured as a domain of heightened executive discretion, and social media has been folded into it as an evidentiary extension of the port of entry.

Against this backdrop, the paper used “Kansas-normal” speech as a reference case. It described how, in local context, firearms posts function as lifestyle markers, religious language of spiritual warfare is read metaphorically, conspiracy-tinged memes and dark humor serve as pressure valves, and foreign policy arguments about Israel, Gaza, and other conflicts are woven into theological and moral narratives. It then showed how vetting systems re-read these same content clusters through risk taxonomies, keyword lists, pattern detection, and human adjudication shaped by institutional incentives.

The heart of the argument framed this process as a double standard of speech: a structured regime in which expression functions as a protected right for some and as a condition attached to a revocable privilege for others. The asymmetry appears in the difference between domestic immunity and border exclusion, in the chilling effects imposed on foreigners whose mobility depends on their timelines, and in the perception of hypocrisy when a state that celebrates free speech at home screens speech at the gate. The border, in this sense, acts as a global editor, penalizing certain patterns of expression without formally banning them.

To make this regime concrete, the paper examined the sociotechnical infrastructures behind screening: the reliance on public data rather than private logs, the fusion of social media with watchlists and travel histories, the inevitability of error and false positives, and the biases embedded in models and human practice. It traced feedback loops in which criteria for suspicion reshape online behavior and thus the data on which future criteria are based.

Finally, the paper stepped into ethical and political territory. It asked what happens to hospitality when strangers are met primarily as risk profiles, how risk management interacts with respect for conscience, how equality before the law is strained by stratified exposure to scrutiny, and what pervasive screening does to the integrity of interior life and social trust. It suggested that more transparent and proportionate practices—narrow tailoring, explanation, oversight, contextual sensitivity, and targeted rather than mass vetting—could reduce some of the most problematic effects, though not eliminate the underlying tension.

9.2 Open questions for law, policy, and platform governance

The analysis leaves a series of unresolved questions that point toward further work in law, policy, and platform design.

In law, one central question is whether any portion of domestic free speech ideals should extend to those at the threshold. Should there be minimal protections against exclusion based solely on lawful, non-inciting expression, even for noncitizens abroad? If so, how might such protections be articulated without unduly constraining legitimate security measures? Another legal question concerns the scope of consular nonreviewability. Is it tenable to leave decisions

that hinge on interpretations of online speech entirely insulated from meaningful judicial review, or is there room for carefully tailored avenues of challenge?

Policy questions cluster around necessity and effectiveness. How often has social media vetting genuinely prevented harm that other tools would have missed, and at what cost in terms of false positives and chilled expression? What metrics should be used to evaluate whether broad, routine screening provides value commensurate with its intrusiveness? How should risk thresholds be calibrated when the consequences for individuals include lifelong exclusion from certain educational, professional, or family opportunities?

For platform governance, the questions are different but related. Knowing that public profiles serve as raw material for border screening, what responsibility, if any, do platforms have to signal this reality to users? Should they provide clearer warnings about the possible downstream uses of public posts by state actors? Should they design privacy defaults or region-specific tools to help users manage cross-border risks, especially for vulnerable populations? How should moderation policies account for the fact that removing content may prevent users from later providing context, while leaving it up may expose them to misinterpretation?

These questions do not have easy answers, but they indicate where future debate and research can focus. Without grappling with them, social media vetting risks drifting forward on autopilot, guided more by habit and institutional inertia than by reflective judgment.

9.3 Personal and collective strategies for maintaining integrity

Beyond structural reforms, there is the lived question of how individuals and communities can maintain integrity under unequal scrutiny. The aim is not to offer defensive tactics as a substitute for systemic change, but to recognize the agency people still have in shaping their own expressive lives.

For noncitizens who anticipate interaction with border regimes, one strategy is compartmentalization rather than complete self-silencing. This can mean separating spaces for intimate, high-trust conversations from public-facing feeds; using private groups, encrypted channels, or in-person gatherings for the most sensitive exchanges; and reserving public timelines for statements one is willing to see misunderstood. It is a compromise, but it may preserve some room for honest speech among trusted interlocutors without handing every word to distant vetting systems.

Another strategy involves intentional context-setting. Where possible, adding explanation to posts that might be ambiguous—stating explicitly that a piece of content is satire, or that a shared image is being criticized rather than endorsed—can reduce, though not eliminate, the risk of misinterpretation. Long-form writing can sometimes convey nuance that fragments and memes cannot, making it harder to strip statements from their argumentative frame.

For citizens in places like Kansas, integrity may take the form of solidarity and advocacy. Recognizing that one's own Kansas-normal speech is protected not because it is inherently less intense or provocative, but because of legal status, can generate empathy for those whose speech is judged under harsher standards. Citizens can use their comparatively secure position to question policies that weaponize expression against outsiders, to support organizations that provide legal assistance to those affected, and to resist narratives that equate certain styles of speech with inherent danger.

At the community level, building “lighthouse” institutions—trusted groups that educate members about the realities of social media vetting, help them interpret opaque denials, and connect them with resources—can mitigate some of the isolation and fear produced by the system. These institutions can also serve as channels through which patterns of misclassification are surfaced and contested in public debates.

Maintaining integrity under unequal scrutiny does not mean pretending the risks do not exist. It means finding ways to preserve honesty, conscience, and mutual recognition even as one navigates a landscape where some words carry heavier weights than others.

9.4 Possible futures: borders, speech, and the politics of visibility

Looking ahead, the intersection of borders and speech could evolve in several directions, each with its own politics of visibility.

One possible future is an expansion of the current trajectory: more data collection, more sophisticated analytic tools, and deeper integration of social media with biometric identifiers, travel histories, and AI-driven behavioral prediction. In such a world, the digital border becomes increasingly thick. The space for strong, dissenting, or unconventional expression that does not carry mobility costs shrinks, especially for noncitizens. Visibility becomes risky; the safest strategy is to leave as little public trace as possible.

A second future involves partial retrenchment. Legal challenges, public concern, or international pressure could lead to limits on the use of social media in vetting—codifying narrow tailoring, requiring clearer justifications for denials, or even prohibiting the use of certain kinds of expressive content as grounds for exclusion. Platforms might adopt stronger privacy-by-default settings, reducing the volume of data readily available to state actors. In this scenario, visibility would remain consequential but less determinative, and the border's editorial power over global discourse would be reduced.

A third future is more complex: fragmentation. Different states adopt different approaches to social media vetting, and platforms respond unevenly, creating a patchwork of regimes. Some borders remain heavily digitized, while others emphasize alternative forms of screening. Individuals navigate this patchwork by tailoring their visibility to the jurisdictions they most care

about, maintaining different expressive personas in different spaces. Speech becomes increasingly conditional on the anticipated audience, and the idea of a single, coherent public self erodes.

Across these futures, the politics of visibility will be central. Who is seen, by whom, under what assumptions, and with what consequences will shape not only border crossings but also the character of online publics. Those with strong legal protections and low exposure to vetting may continue to speak loudly and freely, while those under greater risk may adopt a stance of strategic quiet. The danger is a world in which the loudest voices belong disproportionately to those least vulnerable, and where the experiences and convictions of those under scrutiny fade from view.

To live honestly under unequal scrutiny, then, is to hold together awareness of these dynamics with a refusal to accept them as unchangeable. It is to acknowledge that the protections enjoyed by some are contingent and fragile, and that their extension to others is a matter of ongoing political and ethical work. It is to insist that borders, however necessary for organizing political communities, need not become instruments for silently narrowing the range of acceptable human expression.

The same timelines that today serve as risk dossiers can also be sites of mutual recognition and challenge. Whether they move in one direction or the other will depend on choices made by lawmakers, administrators, platform designers, and users themselves. The double standard of speech described in this paper is a product of those choices. It can be intensified or softened, justified or contested, reproduced blindly or rethought deliberately. What remains constant is the human need to speak, to belong, and to cross thresholds without having to erase oneself at the door.

10. References

10.1 Constitutional and immigration law scholarship

This subsection would gather works that ground the paper’s account of free speech, plenary power, and consular nonreviewability. It would include classic First Amendment theory texts, doctrinal analyses of speech protections, and leading treatments of immigration exceptionalism and executive discretion at the border. Representative sources might include:

- Schauer, F. (1982). *Free Speech: A Philosophical Enquiry*. Cambridge University Press.
- Alexander, L. (2005). *Is There a Right of Freedom of Expression?* Cambridge University Press.
- Fallon, R. H. (2001). *Implementing the Constitution*. Harvard University Press.
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- Motomura, H. (2007). *Americans in Waiting: The Lost Story of Immigration and Citizenship in the United States*. Harvard University Press.
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- Legomsky, S. H., & Rodríguez, C. M. (2015). *Immigration and Refugee Law and Policy* (6th ed.). Foundation Press.
- Cox, A. B., & Rodríguez, C. M. (2020). *The President and Immigration Law*. Oxford University Press.
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- Neuman, G. L. (1993). “The Lost Century of American Immigration Law (1776–1875).” *Columbia Law Review*, 93(8), 1833–1901.
- Legomsky, S. H. (1999). “Fear and Loathing in Congress and the Courts: Immigration and Judicial Review.” *Texas Law Review*, 78(7), 1615–1634.

10.2 Empirical work on social media vetting and security practice

This subsection would collect governmental reports, empirical case studies, and policy analyses that document how social media screening has been implemented in immigration and security contexts, including its effectiveness, costs, and error patterns. It would include inspector general and accountability office reports, as well as academic and civil-society studies of “extreme vetting” and online monitoring.

Illustrative references might include:

- U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General. (2017). *DHS' Pilots for Social Media Screening Need Increased Collaboration, Information Sharing, and Performance Measures* (OIG-17-40).
- U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2019). *Social Media Monitoring: Improved Documentation of Decisions and Better Data Are Needed to Demonstrate Program Effectiveness* (GAO-19-381).
- Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board. (2022). *Report on the Use of Social Media in Federal Security Screening and Vetting* (if available; or similar oversight reports).
- Beduschi, A. (2020). "Digital Identity and Migration: An Overview." *International Review of the Red Cross*, 102(913), 43–73.
- Molnar, P., & Gill, L. (2018). "Bots at the Gate: A Human Rights Analysis of Automated Decision-Making in Canada's Immigration and Refugee System." Citizen Lab/International Human Rights Program.
- Wachter-Boettcher, S., & others. Empirical or policy-focused articles evaluating automated risk scoring and social media analysis in migration control.
- Studies from human rights organizations (e.g., ACLU, Human Rights Watch, Brennan Center for Justice) on social media vetting and its impact on travelers and diaspora communities.

10.3 Studies of platforms, surveillance, and algorithmic governance

Here the focus would be on the broader literature that analyzes how platforms collect and structure data, how algorithmic systems govern visibility and risk, and how surveillance capitalism and automated decision-making reshape social and political life. These works provide the conceptual frame for understanding social media as infrastructure and data source for state vetting.

Representative works could include:

- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. PublicAffairs.
- O'Neil, C. (2016). *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. Crown.
- Pasquale, F. (2015). *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*. Harvard University Press.

- Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. NYU Press.
- Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media*. Yale University Press.
- Crawford, K. (2021). *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*. Yale University Press.
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- Mittelstadt, B. D., Allo, P., Taddeo, M., Wachter, S., & Floridi, L. (2016). "The Ethics of Algorithms: Mapping the Debate." *Big Data & Society*, 3(2), 1–21.
- Kitchin, R. (2017). *Data Lives: How Data Are Made and Shape Our World* (or similar works on data infrastructures and governance).

10.4 Ethical and political analyses of borders, hospitality, and suspicion

This subsection would bring together normative and critical works that examine the ethics of borders, the concept of hospitality to strangers, and the securitization of migration. It would include philosophical accounts of membership and admission, political-theoretical treatments of fear and insecurity, and theological or phenomenological reflections on hospitality and the stranger.

Illustrative references might include:

- Derrida, J. (2000). *Of Hospitality* (A. Dufourmantelle, Ed.; R. Bowlby, Trans.). Stanford University Press.
- Benhabib, S. (2004). *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens*. Cambridge University Press.
- Carens, J. H. (2013). *The Ethics of Immigration*. Oxford University Press.
- Walzer, M. (1983). *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*. Basic Books.
- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford University Press.
- Huysmans, J. (2006). *The Politics of Insecurity: Fear, Migration and Asylum in the EU*. Routledge.
- Bauman, Z. (2016). *Strangers at Our Door*. Polity Press.

- Bosniak, L. (2006). *The Citizen and the Alien: Dilemmas of Contemporary Membership*. Princeton University Press.
- Sager, A. (2020). *Against Borders: Why the World Needs Open Migration*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2012). *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age*. Belknap Press.

Together, these four clusters of references would equip readers to situate the paper within existing scholarship on constitutional protections and immigration exceptionalism, the empirical realities of social media vetting, the dynamics of platforms and algorithmic governance, and the ethical and political questions raised by hospitality, suspicion, and the governance of borders.

The author has published over 4,600 AI-assisted papers at:

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Douglas-Youvan/research> . Google Scholar has indexed these preprints, and if you want a particular reference, the AI mode of a Google search (Gemini) has efficiently catalogued these preprints.